



Are Japanese EFL Teachers Oversensitive to Students' Foreign Accents?: A Review of Empirical Research

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Introduction

A number of suggestions have been presented for communicative English teaching in Japan in response to long-standing criticism that English instruction has not produced students who can communicate with native speakers (NSs) of English. Among them is the introduction of English teaching into public elementary schools. Proponents stress its need based on the advantages that they believe are only accessible to younger learners in the learning process. In 1996 the Ministry of Education designated at least one public elementary school in each of the 47 prefectures for a pilot study of English teaching at earlier ages. Programs and materials geared to this age group have been developed to familiarize children with the target language and its culture. In these programs, instruction is focused on basic interpersonal communicative skills and instruction of grammar is deferred to junior high school.

These experimental projects at elementary schools have yielded mostly positive results. Kanamori (1996) reports that children are learning English with pleasure and enjoying communicative activities including games and skits. However, there is a possible danger that these success stories tend to tempt teachers and educators to believe English teaching at elementary school is a panacea for successful foreign language (FL) acquisition. Wada (1996), for example, warns against a common belief that the current grammar-based English teaching at secondary schools, which is far from successful, will be more functional and effective if learners are well-prepared and motivated by learning English at elementary school.

One of the advantages in teaching English to younger children is that they reach a higher level of acquisition in terms of phonology. Proponents of English teaching at earlier ages often point out children's easy and painless attainment of authentic pronunciation as a strong support for their argument (Tanabe, 1990, p.250). There is research evidence that second language (L2) phonological attainment is strongly conditioned by learner age and that native-like accent is impossible unless first exposure is quite early (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Uematsu, 1997). However, although accent-free pronunciation is desirable, it is doubtful whether strong phonology contributes more to successful communication than other dimensions of language ability. If accented pronunciation severely hampers communication with NSs, starting to teach English at an elementary-school level would put children in a better position in FL acquisition. If, however, other dimensions of language ability including morphosyntax and discourse are more detrimental in getting meaning across, it would be dangerous to expect too much from English teaching at elementary school, where grammar is not taught.

The purpose of the present review is to clarify how seriously NSs perceive phonological deviations of non-native speakers (NNSs) compared with other dimensions of their interlanguage. Six studies will be reviewed that compared the effects of phonological deviations on communication with the counterparts of grammatical errors. Implications of these six studies to English teaching at elementary school in Japan will also be discussed.

In addition to a linguistic aspect, there are social and cultural aspects in which age may affect FL learning. Affective and attitudinal factors related to FL learning are other crucial issues in the discussion of foreign language acquisition. However, these problems are beyond the scope of this review.

Native Speakers' Perception of Interlanguage

Native speakers' attitudes toward non-native speech have been measured in a number of ways (Eisenstein, 1983). Although research designs and target languages of the six studies reviewed here differ from study to study, they compare phonological deviations with morphological, lexical, and syntactical deviations in an attempt to find out which linguistic dimension is most closely related to failure of communication. The target languages these studies deal with are German (Polizter, 1978), French (Ensz, 1982), Spanish (Gynan, 1985; Galloway, 1985), English (Fayer and Krasinski, 1987), and Japanese (Okamura, 1995).

The study by Enszt (1982) stemmed from a desire to examine Henry Higgins's belief that the French don't care what they actually do as long as they pronounce it properly. She constructed five guises containing pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary errors and asked 250 NSs of French, including teachers and non-teachers, to rate them. Each guise represented the following linguistic characteristics:

- (1) strong in pronunciation, weak in grammar
- (2) strong in pronunciation and grammar, weak in vocabulary
- (3) strong in grammar, weak in pronunciation and vocabulary
- (4) strong in grammar and vocabulary, poor in pronunciation
- (5) control for the fourth guise, where the speaker's pronunciation weakness were only slight.

Ensz measured NSs' reactions by use of five-point semantic differential scales which reflected personal characteristics including intelligence, amicability, politeness acuteness, and disposition. Thus, the dependent variable was the audience's attitudes towards the speakers, not

towards their interlanguage. The focus of the study was a socioaffective aspect of communication.

Ensz found that the order of the judges' preference was guise 5 (strong grammar and vocabulary, slightly weak pronunciation), guise 2 (strong pronunciation and grammar, weak vocabulary), guise 4 (strong grammar and vocabulary, poor pronunciation), guise 3 (strong grammar, weak pronunciation and vocabulary), and guise 1 (strong pronunciation, weak grammar). The statistical output indicated that ratings of guise 2 (lack of vocabulary) and guise 4 (lack of pronunciation) were not significantly different. The difference of ratings of guise 2 and 4, and that of guise 3, was not remarkable either. However, guise 1, which represents grammatical weakness, was rated significantly lower, both in statistics and in magnitude. Ensz concludes that French listeners are less tolerant of grammatical errors than they are of phonological errors. A pedagogical suggestion she elicits from this result is that American learners of French should be concerned with grammatical accuracy since French people express intolerance with grammatical errors. She also cautions against current trends in FL teaching that emphasize the spontaneous communication of ideas over grammatical accuracy of language production.

The other five studies discussed in this review measured audience's attitudes towards interlanguage, not their personal impression of the speakers as Ensz did. Although target languages vary, four out of five studies found that phonological errors are less detrimental to communication than morphological, lexical, or syntactical errors.

Polizter (1978) had 146 first-language (L1) German teenagers listen to the recording of 60 pairs of German sentences which contained deviations from standard German typical of American learners of German. He compared six different error types against each other. The

judges listened to each pair of sentences and indicated which sentence in the pair contained the more serious violation of German. The results showed that seriousness of error categories in a descending order was vocabulary, verb morphology, word order, gender confusion, phonology, and case ending. The details of statistical output indicate that vocabulary errors ranked far above grammatical errors, which ranked far above phonological errors. The frequency of vocabulary errors being selected as more serious was 77%, whereas the counterparts of verb morphology, word order, and gender confusion were 55%, 54%, and 51% respectively. Phonological errors ranked far below these grammatical errors, with the frequency of 36%.

Gynan (1985), focusing on Spanish interlanguage of English speakers, supports Politzer. He asked 186 L1 Spanish non-teachers between the ages of 18 and 24 to rate the recording of two oral compositions produced by non-native speakers (NNSs) of Spanish, one representing low proficiency and the other representing above average proficiency. The judges expressed their reactions by rating each speech sample on a seven-point scale in vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation. The findings showed that morphological errors were apparently more salient than phonological ones in the speech of a beginning L2 learner. At the intermediate level, no errors of any kind, either phonological or morphosyntactic, were salient. Based on the results, Gynan proposes that morphosyntax should be given more attention at the initial stages, although he admits phonology is an important factor in the comprehensibility of messages.

Whereas Politzer (1978) and Gynan (1985) measured NSs' reactions to specific aspects of interlanguage by engaging judges in evaluative tasks, Galloway (1985) and Fayer and Krasinski (1987) measured them by asking judges to report their perceptions of interlanguage. In other words, the former measured what judges did whereas the latter measured what judges reported they did. The latter group, Galloway (1985) and Fayer and

Krasinski (1987), reached contradicting results. Galloway found that NSs were not greatly disturbed by poor pronunciation. Fayer and Krasinski, on the other hand, found that deviant pronunciation was more distracting than errors in grammar or lexicon. The details of these two studies will be described below.

Galloway (1985) examined audience's reactions to Spanish speech samples. She asked NNS and NS Spanish teachers as well as NS non-teachers to rate 10 video-taped segments of university-level students of Spanish on five criteria. These criteria were not related to linguistic categories but to attitudinal categories including amount of communication and efforts to communicate. After completing evaluative tasks, judges were asked if they were disturbed by pronunciation. Galloway reports that no group overall seemed greatly disturbed by pronunciation although it formed the largest category of errors committed by the video-taped students. Her results are consistent with Entz (1980), Politzer (1978), and Gynan (1985).

Fayer and Krasinski (1987)'s findings are not consistent with the other five studies discussed in this review. They found that pronunciation was more distracting than grammatical or lexical errors. They investigated NS and NNS college students' reactions to recordings of speech segments produced by Puerto Rican learners of L2 English. The judges evaluated each speaker's language production on six criteria (grammar, pronunciation, intonation, frequency of wrong words, voice quality and hesitations) on separate five-point scales. However, Fayer and Krasinski did not report the mean score of each criterion. Instead, they reported the average of the scores of four criteria: grammar, pronunciation, intonation and word choice.

The comparison of the relative importance of each criterion for communication was conducted based on data obtained from another instrument. After completing the evaluative

task, the judges were asked if any of the above six criteria distracted and/or annoyed them. The results showed that the order of criteria from the most distracting to the least was: pronunciation (92 instances), hesitation (88 instances), grammar (59 instances), word choice (39 instances), intonation (34 instances), and voice (29 instances).

We need caution to interpret the studies conducted by Galloway (1985) and Fayer and Krasinski (1987). Their conclusions were drawn not from what the judges demonstrated in evaluative tasks, but from what they reported they perceived. It is questionable whether what goes on in their minds and what they report goes on in their minds are isomorphic.

The methodological problems involved in Galloway (1985) and Fayer and Krasinski (1987) were clarified by Okamura (1995), who demonstrated that what judges do and what they think they do are not necessarily consistent. Another contribution she made was to examine NNSs' perception of Japanese interlanguage of British English speakers, thus shedding light on a non-European language that previous studies had not explored.

Okamura investigated what criteria L1 Japanese teachers and non-teachers consider the most important to distinguish good from poor speakers of Japanese. There were two phases of the data collection process. First, she asked her judges to rate four speech samples on a 10-point scale on six criteria: grammar, fluency, appropriateness, vocabulary, comprehensibility, and pronunciation. The results showed that both teachers and non-teachers considered fluency and grammar the most crucial criteria to distinguish high proficiency learners from average learners. Pronunciation was a less significant variable than grammar in interlanguage perception, as was previously demonstrated by Politzer (1978) and Ensz (1982).

In the second phase of data collection, Okamura asked the judges to respond to an open-ended questionnaire regarding their perceptions of NNS language production. Interestingly, she

found that there was discrepancy between what they do and what they think. Asked what they think is the most important criterion to distinguish good from poor speakers of Japanese, teachers selected appropriateness and non-teachers selected pronunciation and fluency. Asked to give suggestions to learners for better communication, some non-teachers pointed out that pronouncing each syllable clearly enhances comprehensibility. Thus, Japanese non-teachers think that phonology and fluency are important factors although they actually apply fluency and grammar as criteria to measure NNSs' language ability.

Implications for English Teaching in Japan

Research shows that phonology is a linguistic factor that affects the listener's attitudes toward learner language and/or the speaker. There has not been strong evidence, however, that foreign accents interfere with successful communication more seriously than other linguistic deviations. Indeed, most studies reviewed here suggest that errors in morphology, syntax, and lexicon are more likely to induce negative reactions towards NNSs and the interlanguage they produce.

These results of empirical research provide insights into the debate on the introduction of English teaching at the elementary school level. Although the benefits of classroom instruction of English at earlier ages should not be underestimated, caution is needed against having excessive expectations for its effectiveness. Phonological fluency is desirable, but research findings suggest that grammatical accuracy makes a greater contribution to successful communication than phonological accuracy.

In the current Japanese educational system, explicit grammar instruction starts at a secondary school level whereas English teaching at the selected elementary schools focuses on phonological development as well as enhancement of cultural awareness and motivation towards FL learning. If grammatical accuracy contributes to successful communication more than phonological accuracy as research evidence shows, improving English teaching at a secondary level seems to be needed more than teaching English at younger ages, at least from a linguistic point of view. While resuming the ongoing English teaching at selected elementary schools, we need to reconsider English teaching at secondary schools with the same interest, attention, and vigor.

Another implication is that there is a danger that educational decisions may be made on a false assumption about FL learning. Okamura (1995) found that Japanese non-teachers think that pronunciation and fluency enhance comprehensibility of messages, while in fact, fluency and grammar were the criteria on which they distinguished high proficiency learners from average learners. It is not unreasonable that they hold a false assumption because “of all aspects of human language, pronunciation is, perhaps, the most immediately observable (Thompson 1991).” Linguistically unsophisticated people can easily detect a foreign accent just by listening to short utterances. Here arises the concern that such unverified assumptions are disseminated to the point where they might press curriculum designers and policy makers into making a wrong decision on reforms concerned with English teaching in Japan. Considering that English teaching has always been a hot topic in this nation, the voices of non-teachers of English may possibly exert a powerful influence on the decision making process. It is to be hoped that the current debate on teaching English in Japan will be conducted constructively based on empirical research evidence.

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